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**Review of Svantesson, Jan-Olof / Ràw, Kàm (Damrong Tayanin) / Lindell,  
Kristina / Lundström, Håkan: Dictionary of Kammu Yùan Language and  
Culture**

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**Svantesson, Jan-Olof / Ràw, Kàm (Damrong Tayanin) / Lindell, Kristina / Lundström, Håkan:** *Dictionary of Kammu Yüan Language and Culture*. With botanical identifications by Lennart Engstrand, Marie Widén and Björn Widén. Kopenhagen: NIAS Press 2014. XXXVI, 462 S. m. Abb. 4°. Hartbd. £ 80,00. ISBN 978-87-7694-116-1.

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The *Dictionary of Kammu Yuan Language and Culture* (henceforth DKY) by Jan-Olof Svantesson, Kàm Ràw, Kristina Lindell, and Håkan Lundström is the latest publication in a long-standing series of books on Kammu culture by the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen. Building on this background, the DKY presents a concentrated overview of the Kammu world, rather like an encyclopedia.

Writing a review of a dictionary is not an easy task, as in general dictionaries are here for us to look up specific words, rather than to browse through like other academic reference books. If you find the word you are looking for and you get a clear translation or definition, the dictionary is considered good. If you don't find a substantial number of words you are looking for, or if the translation or definition leaves you as puzzled about the word as you were before, you are likely to consider the dictionary inadequate. Not much more can be said about this kind of book. In general, that is. The situation is radically different with the DKY. As the title suggests, this is not merely a dictionary in the usual meaning of the word, namely a book listing the vocabulary of a language together with corresponding translations or definitions in the target language, possibly with some additional information regarding word class, pronunciation, and examples of usage. To be sure, the DKY does list a good number of Kammu Yuan words on the just over 420 pages of the main dictionary

body – around 14,000 according to the cover text, together with (almost) all relevant information and definitions. But the DKY is much more than that. It is a reference work on Kammu culture, not only ritual practices, but also, and especially, everyday culture, as traditionally practiced by the Kammu people in Laos.

The DKY starts with a short introduction about the compilation of dictionary itself, the arrangements of entries according to the orthography applied for rendering Kammu, as well as explanations of symbols and conventions helping the reader navigate through the main body of the dictionary. The following sections are dedicated to the Kammu people and their traditional culture. Here the reader is presented with a rather compact but comprehensive overview of Kammu family and village life. The native village of Kām Rāw, one of the authors who is also the main source of much of the information provided in the dictionary, is presented with graphics and detailed explanations. This includes marriage groups and kinship terminology, complete with an extensive family chart and maps showing the village Rmcūal as it was in 1960 and 1972. In the latter map, each house is labeled with the respective marriage group and the head of the family. The final chart of this section shows Kām Rāw's close relatives and the houses in which they lived in 1972. This brief but detailed overview of one specific Kammu village enables the reader to relate the information given in the dictionary and its introduction to a real life setting, which makes it much more concrete and tangible. Two tables in this section give an overview of the traditional agricultural calendar and year cycles, which dictate many activities throughout the year. The section ends with a short description of the traditional formation of personal names. The overview of Kammu society and social life covers only six pages, but additional information is found in the main body of the dictionary on specific points. The name formation, for example, is explained in more detail under the entry *c̣h* 'name', which is referenced in the corresponding section of the introduction. Under this dictionary entry, one finds almost one page of background information regarding the meaning and origin of names, why and how specific names are chosen, and what a name tells about its bearer.

The next section, starting on page xxi, gives eight pages of overview of the most important features of the Kammu language, including phonology and orthography, syntax, and morphology. This section is not meant to be a grammar sketch of Kammu, but rather serves as a general overview which helps the reader better understand the dictionary entries. Examples are therefore kept to a minimum. As in other Austroasiatic (and Southeast Asian) languages, expressives are an important feature of

Kammu and are given due space for a description of their formation and function in adequate detail. Expressives also appear prominently in the main body of the dictionary as separate entries. The section on the Kammu language ends with a description of Tai loanwords, including transliteration tables of Lao and Lü, the two major sources of loanwords in Kammu. The authors of the DKY do not fail to mention, though, that a substantial number of Tai loans probably entered Kammu at a stage before the separation of Southwestern Tai into distinct languages.

An extensive bibliography of publications about Kammu language and culture completes the introductory part of the DKY.

The main body of the dictionary runs through 422 pages and not only lists a great number of Kammu lexemes and their usage, but also includes numerous illustrations and detailed cultural information. Names of animals and plants are given with English translations and / or descriptions, as well as, where available, the corresponding terms of the biological nomenclature. Apart from the lexical entries, the dictionary also gives complete texts of songs, sayings, and prayers in Kammu with English translations.

On the final 40 pages of the book, the reader finds detailed maps of the Kammu dialects and the surroundings of Rmcūal village, as well as appendices with specialized vocabulary lists, including geographical names, words found in the Kammu texts given in the dictionary (songs, prayers, sayings), traditional measures, plant and animal names, and specific terminology describing village life. A brief English index covering the appendices concludes the volume.

The DKY is an outstanding achievement for different reasons, some of which have become evident in the preceding summary of the book. A few points of special interest are given some more space in the following paragraphs.

As mentioned above, the DKY is rather an encyclopedia of the Kammu world than a dictionary, inviting the reader to browse through its pages. It is obvious that the DKY is not aimed at a language learner audience, but rather at a readership interested in Kammu culture and language for anthropological or linguistic reasons. This readership indeed finds ample material in this volume. One of the benefits for the anthropologically interested reader lies in the very detailed description of all aspects of Kammu life, complemented with simple drawings of difficult to describe items.

On pages 24–25, for example, under the entry *cṃɔ̌l* 'to sow', the reader not only finds a detailed description of the traditional Kammu way of sowing rice, starting with the burning of the fields and going on through sowing and ending with a reference to the next phase in the agricultural

work, namely ‘weeding’, but also a drawing of rice sowing with the relevant items labeled. Also included in the same entry are a number of prayers, said before, during, and after the sowing, in Kammu with English translations.

On pages 84–88, under the entry *kàaŋ* ‘house’, a full description of the Kammu house is given, completed with labeled plans and drawings showing the parts and the construction of a traditional house, which according to the text lasts for six to ten years before it has to be torn down and rebuilt. Again the relevant prayers are given in Kammu and English. The house is the place to live not only for the extended family, consisting of six to ten adults and a number of children, but also of the house spirits or *róoy kàaŋ*. Spirits play an important role in Kammu culture and daily life, as is evidenced by the seven pages dedicated to the description of the different spirits, starting on page 298. Here the reader learns that the house spirit, who lives in the loft of the family house, is responsible for the well-being of the family and their domestic animals and also looks after the family’s possessions. These spirits, the spirits of the ancestors of the family, can be offended by misbehavior in the house, which is regulated by conventional rules regarding, for example, when and how to prepare food. Besides the house spirits, a large number of spirits are listed with their individual characteristics and how to treat them, and the prayers to be used in addressing them.

On pages 332 to 334, the wedding ceremony, *sryà*, is detailed and wedding song lyrics given, and starting on page 378 the reader learns everything about *tráak*, water buffaloes, on four pages. Again there are drawings to show different body parts of a buffalo and different shapes of buffalo horns and their names, and sayings and riddles used in different activities related to buffaloes. Unlike in other societies in Southeast Asia, buffaloes in Kammu culture are not working animals, but have spiritual value and are seen as assets which can be turned into cash when there is need by selling them. The importance of buffaloes for the Kammu is also illustrated by the fact that each full grown buffalo receives a name, which is based on its gender and some prominent feature of its body, such as the shape of its horns or color.

These are just a few examples of how much cultural information is included in the DKY, chosen to illustrate a few points of interest. The list could be extended to any length, as there is hardly a page without illustration or explanatory text of some cultural item or activity. The anthropologically interested reader will certainly not be disappointed with what they find in the DKY, and a rather complete picture of the Kammu world can be extracted from this single volume.

The other potential readership of the DKY, namely linguists working on Austroasiatic or Southeast Asian languages, will naturally be more concerned with the linguistic information found in the dictionary. As mentioned above, the linguistic description of Kammu given in the introduction is rather short and far from being a grammar sketch, which would be well beyond the scope of the dictionary anyway. Still the DKY is an invaluable source for linguists, as a wealth of linguistic information is given in the dictionary, albeit sometimes implicit rather than explicit and not always directly accessible to the non-initiated reader. Some linguistic characteristics of Kammu are readily visible from the dictionary entries, though. These include the rhyming form in euphonic reduplication, which plays as important a role in Kammu as in other Southeast Asian languages. These reduplicating forms, usually with an alteration in the vowel or vowel plus final consonant, are given with all entries where they exist, mostly with verbs and expressives. The importance of euphonic reduplication is witnessed by the fact that it occurs also with loans from Lao and Lue, which proves that the process of reduplication with rhyme alteration is well and alive in the language.

Numeral classifiers are another Southeast Asian feature which is also important in Kammu, and the introduction lists over 40 classifiers occurring in the ordinary language (p. xxiv). As the distribution of classifiers is not usually semantically transparent (or logical), the correct classifier has to be learned for each noun. The DKY indicates the appropriate classifier in the entries for nouns, which comes very handy and is a welcome contrast to other dictionaries of Southeast Asian languages, where one normally searches for this information in vain.

Entries of verbal roots are complemented with common derivations of the roots, and the etymology of words of Tai origin (mainly Lao and Lue) is given where available. The reader with general linguistic interest in Kammu thus finds a wide array of information in the individual entries.

But a closer look reveals even more interesting linguistic details. The form of Lao (or Tai) loans with originally voiced stop initials in Kammu, for example, shows that they have been borrowed at an early stage, before voiced plosives were devoiced in Lao, at least around 600 years ago, as is also mentioned in the introduction (p. xxvii). Kammu in these cases shows a plain stop, corresponding to Kammu internal development of original voiced initial stops, whereas Lao has aspirated stops in the same place, for example (p. 234) *pàay* ‘to row, to paddle’ from Lao *pháay*, orthographic <baay>. Kammu here gets the regular low tone and plain stop from the voiced initial. In other cases the form of a loanword

shows it to be a more recent borrowing, like (p. 354) *thón* ‘to bear, to endure, durable, long-lasting’ from Lao *thón*, spelled <don>. Here both the initial aspirated stop and the high tone reflect directly the modern spoken Lao form of the word. The form of the Tai loans in Kammu thus tells us something of the history of contact, and the DKY is a good source for a detailed study in this field, albeit often the evidence and patterns have to be brought together from a number of places in the DKY.

Derivation by affixes is a widespread morphological process in Austroasiatic languages. That the process was fully productive by the time Kammu borrowed Tai words is shown by its applicability to these loanwords. The Tai loanword *néen* ‘tight, stable’, from Tai *hnén* (p. 209), for example, has the two derivative forms *pñnéen* ‘to tighten’ and *mnénéen* ‘tightness, coherence’. The loan *pát* ‘to swat, to wave, to whisk, to sweep away, to dust’, from Tai *pat*, (p. 235) has three nominalized forms, the analytic *sáh pát* (with the Lao nominalizer *suŋ*), and the prefixed form *rtpát* ‘action of swatting, whisking, dusting’ and the infix *pñnàt* ‘swatter, duster’. Many more examples are found

on almost every page of the dictionary and offer extensive material for a study of Kammu morphology. Together with the numerous Kammu texts scattered throughout the DKY, one could actually come up with a decent description of the language. Again, this would of course involve a thorough screening of the dictionary entries and bringing together the scattered data systematically.

Finding weak points in the DKY is not an easy matter, as it offers a wealth of material for further study to the two main groups it addresses, as outlined above. That much of the information has to be gathered by going through many entries lies in the nature of a dictionary as opposed to an anthropological or grammatical description. The only thing one would like to have is a more inclusive English index that covers also the main body of the dictionary, not only the appendix. Apart from this minor lack, the DKY is a nearly perfect tool for anthropologists and linguists interested in Southeast Asian cultures and languages and will hopefully serve as an example for future dictionaries to be produced of the languages not only of Southeast Asia.